

**Chapter 15**  
**Fifteenth-Century Slave Trade:**  
**The Portuguese in West Africa**  
(1455-1456)  
Alvise da Cadamosto

**Introduction**

Many factors, including economic depression and innovations in seafaring technology, inspired the Portuguese to take the lead in the exploration of West Africa by Europeans during the early fifteenth century. Under the guidance and sponsorship of Prince Henry the Navigator (1394-1460), Portuguese sailors pushed south along the African coast, collecting information about the weather, topography, and people they encountered. As Portugal sent out expeditions searching for a direct route to Asian markets, Prince Henry made good use of the data accumulated by his explorers, establishing large sugar concerns on various islands off the West African coast. Purchasing African natives to work these new plantations began another lucrative financial venture for the Portuguese: the slave trade. Venetian explorer Alvise da Cadamosto helped the Portuguese considerably by charting coastal Senegal and Gambia for them in two voyages. His account of these trips demonstrates the developing social and economic relationships between Europeans, Arabs, and sub-Saharan Africans at the dawn of the age of European expansion.

**Questions to Consider**

- How does the author explain the entrance of Portugal into the African slave trade?
- The author describes the Muslim Arabs as "very hostile to Christians" but then goes on to detail the close commercial relationship between the Arabs and the Portuguese. How do you explain this contradiction?
- This document comes to us from a Venetian sailing for Portugal in the 1450s. By the end of the century many Italians (including Columbus) would sail not for their native states, but for Portugal or Spain. What political and economic circumstances account for this?

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You should also know that behind this Caou Bianco on the land, is a place called Hoden,<sup>1</sup> which is about six days inland by camel. This place is not walled, but is frequented by Arabs, and is a market where the caravans arrive from Tanbutu [Timbuktu], and from other places in the land of the Blacks, on their way to our nearer Barbary. The food of the peoples of this place is dates, and barley, of which there is sufficient, for they grow in some of these places, but not abundantly. They drink the milk of camels and other animals, for they have no wine. They also have cows and goats, but not many, for the land is dry. Their oxen and cows, compared with ours, are small.

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<sup>1</sup> Wadan, an important desert market about 350 miles east of Arguim. Later, in 1487, when the Portuguese were endeavouring to penetrate the interior they attempted to establish a trading factory at Wadan which acted as a feeder to Arguim, tapping the north-bound caravan traffic and diverting some of it to the west coast.

1 They are Muhammadans, and very hostile to Christians. They never remain settled, but are  
2 always wandering over these deserts. These are the men who go to the land of the Blacks, and  
3 also to our nearer Barbary. They are very numerous, and have many camels on which they carry  
4 brass and silver from Barbary and other things to Tanbuto and to the land of the Blacks. Thence  
5 they carry away gold and pepper, which they bring hither. They are brown complexioned, and  
6 wear white cloaks edged with a red stripe: their women also dress thus, without shifts. On their  
7 heads the men wear turbans in the Moorish fashion, and they always go barefooted. In these  
8 sandy districts there are many lions, leopards, and ostriches, the eggs of which I have often eaten  
9 and found good.

10  
11 You should know that the said Lord Infante of Portugal [the crown prince, Henry the Navigator]  
12 has leased this island of Argin to Christians [for ten years], so that no one can enter the bay to  
13 trade with the Arabs save those who hold the license. These have dwellings on the island and  
14 factories where they buy and sell with the said Arabs who come to the coast to trade for  
15 merchandise of various kinds, such as woollen cloths, cotton, silver, and "alchezeli," that is,  
16 cloaks, carpets, and similar articles and above all, corn, for they are always short of food. They  
17 give in exchange slaves whom the Arabs bring from the land of the Blacks, and gold tiber. The  
18 Lord Infante therefore caused a castle to be built on the island to protect this trade for ever. For  
19 this reason, Portuguese caravels are coming and going all the year to this island.

20  
21 These Arabs also have many Berber horses, which they trade, and take to the Land of the Blacks,  
22 exchanging them with the rulers for slaves. Ten or fifteen slaves are given for one of these  
23 horses, according to their quality. The Arabs likewise take articles of Moorish silk, made in  
24 Granata and in Tunis of Barbary, silver, and other goods, obtaining in exchange any number of  
25 these slaves, and some gold. These slaves are brought to the market and town of Hoden; there  
26 they are divided: some go to the mountains of Barcha, and thence to Sicily, [others to the said  
27 town of Tunis and to all the coasts of Barbary], and others again are taken to this place, Argin,  
28 and sold to the Portuguese leaseholders. As a result every year the Portuguese carry away from  
29 Argin a thousand slaves. Note that before this traffic was organized, the Portuguese caravels,  
30 sometimes four, sometimes more, were wont to come armed to the Golfo d'Argin, and  
31 descending on the land by night, would assail the fisher villages, and so ravage the land. Thus  
32 they took of these Arabs both men and women, and carried them to Portugal for sale: behaving in  
33 a like manner along all the rest of the coast, which stretches from Cauo Bianco to the Rio di  
34 Senega and even beyond.